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ABSTRACT

A survey investigated students' attitudes towards the writing activities and experiences in a children's literature course in which students were required to develop, orally share, revise after peer collaboration, and submit for possible publication a folktale or modern fantasy story. Surveys were completed by 37 students enrolled in two classes. Results indicated that students almost unanimously "agreed" with each of the six statements about the process and activities involved in writing the folktale or modern fantasy story. About one-third of the students wrote a comment at the end of the questionnaire. These comments were very positive about the experience and many offered suggestions for improvement. The few negative comments expressed either the wish that the writing process had started earlier in the semester or noted that involvement in the publishing process was less than complete. Results of the survey indicated that students believed the activities of developing and sharing their writings cooperatively were valuable and positive experiences. (Thirty-two references are attached.) (MG)

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Teachers have always been encouraged to engage students in writing assignments, especially meaningful ones. Further, teachers at all levels are asked to incorporate writing in all content areas across the curriculum from mathematics to computer science (Beutler, 1988; Bullock, Laine & Slinger, 1989; Frager, 1985; Gentile, 1983). Therefore, student-writers are composing materials from the primary school level "dictated language experience stories" to sophisticated graduate school level student-edited law journals (Borders, 1990; Brown, 1989; Leibman and White, 1989; Spiegel, 1989). But most of the student-writings are paragraphs, compositions and critiques responding to essays, novels, and articles read for English, humanities, and social science classes.

Additionally, teachers have found other ways of involving students in writing projects as extra-curricular activities. Some students participate in such writing activities as the school or college newspapers, yearbooks, journals, school organization newsletters and magazines, and even student-written orientation handbooks for new

students (Carter, 1989; Smith, 1989; The Round Table, 1989). Other students may be involved in special summer writing programs, remedial and regular English writing classes and creative writing workshops (Hidalgo, 1988; Luvaas, 1988; Puckett, 1989).

Today, more than ever before, writing is viewed as an essential part of the teaching/learning process. This view of writing has achieved more prominence because studies indicate a decline in the writing abilities of students at all academic levels (National Commission for Excellence in Education, 1983 and 1984). However, in spite of the documented writing deficiencies of students, teachers still find it difficult to incorporate stimulating writing assignments into their regular course schedules. That was always our predicament too until we decided to incorporate relevant writing assignments into our regular course work.

This article describes the results of a survey evaluating the writing activities and experiences of the students who were enrolled in the course entitled "Children's Literature." The course was designed to give prospective teachers, teachers, and librarians working knowledge of the major content material of children's literature and practical methods and procedures for selecting, analyzing, evaluating and presenting good quality books to children and young adults. Special ways in which teachers and librarians can use literature to communicate better with children from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds were explored during the course.

Additionally, the course was taught with an emphasis on books and materials that foster positive self-images and self-concepts of children with a different cultural heritage and various types of handicaps.

A variety of modes of teaching were utilized during the one-semester course. There were lectures by the instructor, presentations by guest speakers, oral presentations by groups of students, sharing of a variety of children's books and materials by both the teacher and the students, oral class discussions of assigned readings and group projects, and films of children's stories. The students were actively involved in the teaching and learning process during the entire course.

Students enrolled in the course were required to: a) make an annotated card bibliography of 50 books, including examples of books from all the major types of literature presented during the course (Subsections of the bibliography included award books and multi-cultural, multi-ethnic books), b) participate in a group presentation demonstrating creative ways to motivate pupils to read different types of literature, c) submit a short lesson plan presenting a book to an individual child or a class, and d) complete a mid-term and final examination.

When the course was taught during the Spring Semester 1989, a new teaching strategy was developed and implemented. The basic framework for the course was maintained; the content, reading materials, and most of the objectives and requirements for the course were

preserved. But the methodology, time allotment per class period, some requirements, and class activities were slightly revised to include more writing, sharing, collaboration and cooperative learning.

Effective Spring Semester 1989, students are now required to develop, orally share, revise after peer collaboration, and submit a typewritten folktale or modern fantasy story for a grade and possible publication in our book, Once Upon A Rainbow. Students also share orally and in writing recollections of their childhood experiences with books and a chart comparison of variant tales of "Cinderella" or other folktales. Both of these writings are ungraded and are used as part of the regular classroom learning activities.

This new course design is congruent with what current research says are the characteristics of effective teaching and active student learning. Researchers have found that outstanding teachers structure the learning environment so that opportunities are provided for student control of and extended participation in the learning process. Excellent instructors are now seeing students as partners in the learning process, partners who form a team with the instructor (Bayer, 1990; Cochran, 1989; Daniels, 1990), as we did in writing Once Upon A Rainbow.

Results of surveys indicate that students clearly prefer a mixture of teaching methodology, including lectures and personalized, individualized interactions with the teacher and their peers (Shrawder, 1990). Further, surveys of college students suggest that students

like courses that are academically demanding but offer frequent opportunities to revise and improve their work as they go along. Research showed that students learn best when they have a chance to submit an early version of their work, get detailed feedback and criticism, and then hand in a final version for a grade (Fiske, 1990; Shrawder, 1990). This was the procedure followed in the writing and revising of the students' folktales and modern fantasy stories and annotated card bibliographies.

Educators have advocated the use of collaborative and cooperative learning in the classroom as another means of improving the teaching/learning process (Bayer, 1990). Studies suggest that students who study in small groups do better than students studying alone (Fiske, 1990; Morris, 1989). Through careful design of the classroom setting (guidelines), specific instruction in the evaluative method (purpose of the sharing), and precise structuring of the assignment, students can gain tremendously from collaborative or group learning. Furthermore, cooperative learning methods are said to reflect the way people most often work in their professional and social lives (Casey, 1989; Cherry, Lightfoot, and Towell, 1989; Morris, 1989). The revised "Children's Literature" course engages students in collaboration or cooperative learning activities.

Requiring students to write in a literature class is a normal course expectation; however, motivating students to write for publication created a new dimension that frightened them. It was necessary to explain the benefits

of writing for publication in order to alleviate their fears. Numerous benefits were discussed. Paramount among them was that publishing as a "pre-professional" would enhance their resumes, employability, credibility and reputations. Secondly, as a "student-author," they would serve as role-models to future college students as well as pupils in the elementary and secondary schools. The students would also "add to the body of knowledge" in their profession as other writers have noted (Adams, 1987; Burnham, 1986; Cochran, 1989; Wilson, 1990). Last but not least, students were reminded of the joy, pride, and increased self-esteem that comes with a job well done; it feels great to have an editor accept and affirm your writings (Wilson, 1990).

As predicted, the students were very proud of their tales after the stories were praised highly by their peers and others. The students were very excited to see their contributions in an anthology which was first published in-house and finally by a national publishing company. From verbal and non-verbal expressions, the students appeared to enjoy the new course format, requirements, and class activities. To obtain their opinions and reactions in a more systematic manner, a questionnaire was developed and administered to the students (KaiKai, R. and KaiKai, S., 1990).

A study was conducted of the students involved in writing the tales for the book, Once Upon A Rainbow. The study sought to find out whether the student-writers thought the activities of developing, writing and sharing

folktales and modern fantasies: 1) were valuable to them, 2) increased their knowledge and understanding of folktales and modern fantasies, 3) increased their love and appreciation for these two types of literature, and 4) enhanced their concept of the "Reading/Writing" connection or relationship. The study further attempted to find out whether the student-writers increased their knowledge of writing for publication and whether they would like to participate in a similar activity in the future.

Surveys were distributed to thirty-eight (38) students enrolled in the two children's literature classes in which the development and writing of the folktales and modern fantasies occurred. One class was taught at a predominantly Black urban-oriented state university, and the other was taught at a predominantly white suburban state university. Responses were received from 37 of the student-writers, for a response rate of 97%. There was an extreme amount of homogeneity in the types of students and their opinions regarding the activities. The students were upperclassmen, primarily majoring in Elementary and Early Childhood Education, aged 25 and under, and were predominantly female. Respondents agreed with all six of the opinion statements: on a scale where 4=Strongly Agree and 1=Strongly Disagree, the mean responses ranged from a low of 3.3 to a high of 3.5 with an overall mean for the six statements of 3.39. Nearly a third of the respondents provided written-in comments, most of which were positive observations or suggestions for improvement.

Most of the respondents were seniors (54%) or juniors (27%); 81% were majors in Elementary Education; and 87% were females. Nearly two-thirds of the students (60%) were 21 years of age or younger, and one-third were between 22 and 25 years old. Slightly more than a third (38%) were White and 60% were Black/African-American. The modal respondents, then, was a black female senior between 18 and 21 who was majoring in Elementary Education.

Students almost unanimously "agreed" with each of the six statements about the process and activities involved in writing the folktale or modern fantasy story. On the first four items, at least 97% of the respondents reported they "Strongly Agree" or "Agree" with the statement and 94% responded similarly to the statement about participating again in a similar activity. Only on Statement 5 was there less than consensus: "only" 76% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the process increased their knowledge of the process of publishing a book or an article, while 16% disagreed, and 8% were unsure.

About one-third of the students (30%) wrote a comment at the end of the Questionnaire. These comments were very positive about the experience and many offered suggestions for improvement; the few "negative" comments expressed either the wish that the writing process had started earlier in the semester or the concern reflected in responses to Statement 5 that involvement in the publishing process was less than complete. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of the opinions were categorized as

"suggestion or positive," 18% were considered "negative," and another 18% were a combination of something "negative" and something deemed a positive observation or a suggestion.

Students made numerous comments. The comments varied from: "Pictures will enhance the book. Also, putting reading levels can help teachers choose stories for their class," "I think only students who are interested in writing a story for 'Once Upon A Rainbow' should have to write a story," "I feel that we should have started on it sooner, but other than that, it went smoothly. And I would love to take part in another assignment like that," "I think we should have started on our folktales earlier within the semester. That way, we could share more and get lots of ideas," "I enjoyed doing this project. This is the first time I've ever written a folktale and I had a lot of fun and would do it again," "I couldn't think of any improvements. Your technique was great! I do wish that you would have continued teaching at TSU. Have an enjoyable and safe vacation and return," "The only reason I answered unsure on questions 4 & 5 is because we didn't record our stories or participate in the publishing process. I have since written another short story and would love to learn about how I could have it published," "I would have benefited from seeing the editing process (possibly a checklist) before my folktale was published. Overall, this has been an exciting experience. Wow! A story I wrote is actually being published. This is very encouraging," "Perhaps we could have written more stories,

i.e., one story for each category, then select perhaps 2-3 to publish in the book," "I feel we should have sat down and gone over our stories with some type of editor to improve and perfect our work. I feel this would be very valuable constructive criticism," to "I know nothing about publishing!"

Indeed, it is apparent from the results of the survey that students believed the activities of developing and sharing their writings cooperatively were valuable and positive experiences. Therefore, teachers at all levels must seize the opportunity to gain the confidence of students to write collaboratively for publication.

At a time when confidence in the ability of educational institutions seems to be at a low ebb, displaying the writings of students to a national audience will provide a much needed boost to teachers and educational institutions. It is imperative to urge, guide, and motivate students to write in an effort to enhance the learning process, while gaining some "pre-professional" recognition.

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